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Early school leaving and the classed and gendered assumptions of 'good student'/'good girl'/'good woman'.

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Abstract

While statistically many more young women appear to be moving through education in a linear, predictable fashion, that is, completing Year 12 and proceeding on to tertiary studies, those young women from low socio-economic backgrounds who 'choose' to leave school before completing the VCE—often for a variety of reasons--are categorised as 'at risk', labelled as 'marginalised', 'in need', and occasionally 'dangerous' within public debates. Within feminist and post-structural theories, however, identities are not viewed as one-dimensional or set in place by a single decision, but rather are seen as fluid, often contradictory 'assemblages'. To think beyond the labels and categories, it is necessary to ask how young women who have not followed the predictable linearity of the mainstream, those who have left 'early', construct their identities, 'manage' their lives, make sense of their choices and plan for the future. Do they live lives of 'quiet desperation' or do they make informed responses to difficult times--or something else again?

This paper draws on some of the interview data from an ARC-funded project with three young women who left school 'early'. At the micro level, the paper examines how they 'assemble' and present a sense of self during the interviews through reflections on their reasons for leaving school, their post-school experiences and the lives they are currently leading. Secondly, the data is analysed in order to consider: how do these narratives take up or resist the classed and gendered assumptions that underpin constructions of 'good student'/'good girl'/'good woman'? How might feminist perspectives think more productively about lives lived differently?

Introduction

In this paper I consider the interviews of three young women who as 'early school leavers' volunteered to be part of the ARC-funded project, 'Young women negotiating from the margins of education and work'[1] and to speak about their reasons for leaving school and the experiences that make up their post-school lives. In my analysis, I draw on the work of Rose (1996) and of Stanley (2000) to consider how different perspectives might produce alternative readings of what it means to be 'at risk' or 'marginalised'. In particular, I address the question: how might a feminist analysis of 'good student', 'good girl' and 'good woman', as these discourses operate in the auto/biographical narratives constructed through the interviews, provide richer ways of making sense of these young women's lives?

'At risk' and 'marginalised' individuals

While the meaning of 'early school leaving' has changed in the last 20 years, the concept has been used as both an indicator and predictor of individual social and economic problems. Bessant et al note

> …an 'incomplete education" has been defined as the key factor that places the young person "at risk" of unemployment…An unfinished education is said to also place the young person "at risk" of other social ills such as psychological depression, juvenile crime, suicide, homelessness, and drug abuse (Bessant et al, 2003, pp. 32).

Education's role to ensure that young people are skilled up enough to become contributing members of the 'knowledge economy' and not a drain on the public purse is consistently repeated in policy documents, economic papers and social/educational reports, as well popular media. What is a taken for granted assumption is that to be viewed as 'successful', students must remain through Year 12 and gain certification.

While particular *groups* may be seen to be 'disadvantaged within the schooling system, (due to 'gender, 'race', class or ethnicity), and therefore at risk of early school leaving, most educational and/or vocational programs still take as their starting point for change *the individual* student—not the group per se. This emphasis on *the individual* as both the instigator and foci of change is central to late modernity/ neo-conservative philosophy. Shaping one's self, building one's identity, becoming a subject, analysing the processes of 'subjectification', becoming whoever and whatever one wants—all of these albeit in different ways foreground an all encompassing passion within Western culture in the 21st century: how to be and become an individual. The notion of 'freedom to choose' is central to this particular notion of the subject and as Rose (1996) argues:

> The forms of freedom we inhabit today are intrinsically bound to a regime of subjectification in which subjects are not merely 'free to choose,' but *obliged to be free*, to understand and enact their lives in terms of choice under

> conditions that systematically limit the capacities of so many to shape their own destiny (p. 17)

Rose articulates a major contradiction that has relevance to analysing how young people make sense of them selves as 'early school leavers'. On the one hand, young people in today's culture are '*obliged…to understand and enact their lives as a matter of choice',* make sense of their experiences, explain them on the basis of free choice. eg., the decision to leave school early. Yet, what is veiled beneath this 'regime' of the freely choosing individual are the 'conditions' by which many young people's choices are deeply restricted. This need for individuals to appear as autonomous and self-directed operates on a range of levels—not merely the conscious.

Rose uses the notion of 'assemblages' to suggest the ways in which in determining the freely choosing 'self' of identity, this is inextricably caught up in what might be understood as governing discourses, taken-for-granted mainstream understandings.

Rose (1996, p. 196) makes the point that

> …it is important to recognize simultaneously that this …is not a free space: persons' relations to themselves are stabilized in assemblages that vary from sector to sector, operating via different technologies depending upon one's identification as adjusted or maladjusted, normal or pathological, lawbreaker or honest citizen, man or woman, rich or poor, black or white, employed or unemployed,…in the new territories of exclusion and marginalisation brought into existence by the fragmentation of the social…

In thinking through 'one's identification', the work of Liz Stanley (2000), who as a feminist, explores the notion of 'women-made selves', is helpful. She argues that women, through writing and/or speaking auto/biographically, work to locate themselves in relation to what Stanley calls 'audit selves'. About this idea of the 'audit self', Stanley says:

> 'Audit selves are quintessentially public selves, publicly created profiles which act as measures and prophecies of what a range of 'types' of selves are and can be. What these witness in the contemporary setting is the *rise of the public woman*, the plethora of public versions of what types of woman there are, and what these selves 'are like',
>
> The relevance of the idea of 'audit selves' to the concerns of feminist auto/biography can be indicated by reference to some of the figures, *personae* rather than persons, who have stalked public discourse in recent years, for example… 'the sexually abused girl', 'the mentally ill woman', 'the part-time woman worker', 'the single mother', 'the menopausal woman'… [And I would add the ''marginalised young woman'] Audit selves are composite figures, typically heavily gendered ones, which are artefacts of information collection, retrieval and analysis systems…' (p. 50)

As Stanley points out, such composites/profiles of personae in time take on a life of their own—become more 'real' than the lived experiences of 'actual' young women. This is not to suggest that composites drawn from statistics and written as profiles are not useful; rather, that such 'personae' can too often stand in for, and be used as a means of surveillance and regulation. The 'profile' ie., the 'audit selves' can be used as a measure against and sometimes a replacement for the real experiences of actual [individual] women. Too often also, such 'audit selves' cast the potential or need for change on the individuals rather than on systems or institutions. Thus the notion of the 'freely choosing individual' becomes both desired and damning.

One of the purposes of this research project is to move beyond the statistical, large scale studies of 'at risk' and 'marginalised' to examine survival strategies and crucial turning points in the lives of these young women. By a close analysis of the young women's stories, it may be possible to understand the conditions which enhance or limit their 'choices' while at school and

since leaving, and to examine the extent to which such 'choices' are influenced by material realities of gender and class. conditions[2]

Three Stories

Each of the young women discussed here left school early—ie, before completing VCE; left without recognised academic qualifications, no particular job skills and only one of them now is 'marginally attached to the labour force'.

Two of the three young women's 'stories' offer different ways of making sense of 'at risk' of leaving school early or of the category of 'marginalised'—in part because they speak of their experiences not just in the two or three years after they left formal schooling but in the eight years since. By examining what they say about their lives in the intervening years, by analysing what they construct as 'good girl/good student/good woman', better insights into 'what happens' to young women post formal schooling are gained. Such insights 'flesh out' the personae of audits.

Anna: 'Maybe you have to live a bit to decide what it is you want to do.'

Anna was 26 at the time of the interview, has been with her partner for seven years and has three children age 5, 3 and 1. In her interview, she tells the story of her self as a school girl: she speaks of being well liked by her teachers, trusted, an 'A' student, a highly competent sports person who made the 'All Australian Squad' in basketball, played for Victoria at sixteen, and was also a skilled referee. She says she always 'loved school' saw it as a 'big social event', would hitch a ride to school if she and her brother missed the bus rather than stay home. School was a 'refuge' to her from the 'troubles at home' with her mother. About this she says:

> I think it was easy for me. Like easy. Even though I had all my troubles happening at home with mum and everything, school was like a refuge for me. I loved it. It was like 'oh God let's get to school, let's get out of the house'. No I found it really easy, made friends easy, never got picked on.

By Year 10 she had left home—but not school—and she presents this as a choice on her part, saying:

> It was my choice in the end. I mean me and my mum were having big troubles. Like we were sort of like chalk and cheese under the same roof. Like we're the best of friends now, but under the same roof we would just grate against each other and it wasn't a good environment at the time. We ended up having an almighty fight over something, I can't even remember what it was now and I just said, 'Listen I think it would be better if I moved out' and she just went, 'Ok fair enough. It's up to you, it's your decision.''

At this point, she switched schools, lived with friends, lived in a boarding house, went through Year 11 and completed all subjects successfully. However, it was 'choice' again—or the mistaken 'choices'/lack of choices that ended her schooling. She says:

> I just had enough of school basically. That and the fact that in year 11 when you get to choose your subjects for VCE I had no idea what I wanted to go into at university. Like it was just like 'well you have to *choose your pathway* because if you don't have that right…' and I said, 'Well I don't know what I want to do. What if I just do a bit of this and bit of that and a bit of this. And they said, 'All right, do that' and when I finished year 11 and I passed all my subjects in year 11 and I was like well? They said to me in year 12, 'Well what subjects are you going to do?' and I was like, 'Well I don't know-- I still don't know what I want to do. And they said, 'Well you are going to have to pick something' and I went, 'Oh, ok' and I decided, I can't even remember what it was at the time, something like, some silly idealistic thing like flight attendant or something. I don't even remember and they said 'Well, you're going to have to go back and do your subjects in year 11 to *get into that pathway*.' So I would have had to repeat, well not repeat year 11, but do other subjects. […] I just sort of lost it from there. I just went, 'Oh

> another fricken year of school.' And I just like I need a break and at that stage I was with my husband and I just went no, this is just too much. I said I'm leaving…And I figured if I wanted to, I'd go back to school and it just never ended up happening.'

Anna after leaving school describes this time of her life as 'really hard'; she saw herself as 'floating', unable to get a job, unclear of what to do. She and her partner spent six months in Queensland looking for work, unsuccessfully, but missed their families and so returned to the area where she had grown up. When she found herself pregnant with her first child at 20, she says ' That sort of gave me a purpose.'

'Ellen would do very well if she applied herself and stopped being so disruptive'

Ellen too is 26; she has one daughter, age 6. She has been with her partner, who is Anna's brother, for five years. Ellen speaks of her 'self' as a school girl in different terms than those of Anna. She describes herself as having 'to work very hard at everything' particularly 'anything theory based—English and that sort of written stuff' and says she was 'terrible at maths'. She says she loved sports and art, was 'sports mad', 'lived for sport and friends'. She was in athletics, track and field, basketball, softball but adds that this wasn't 'so much through my high school years. I played netball through my high school years because that was the in thing for girls back then. No, I lived for the sport days'.

She describes herself as 'not one of the popular' girls:

> You know in schools there's popular groups and there's, you know, geeks …I wasn't one of the popular ones but I wasn't one of the geeky ones. I was one of those people that knew everyone, flitted about from group to group…But the teachers knew and generally the popular kids were the kids that did well in their studies… and like the teachers kind of knew who they were. So they all got a lot more help. I suppose, I mean--I wasn't a troublemaker but I was

> always disruptive… That was always sent home on my reports. 'Ellen would do very well if she applied herself and stopped being so disruptive.' …the teachers never really made it so that you thought you could go and ask them for help…

She decided to repeat year 10 on the advice of the counsellor who said her grades weren't good enough to do VCE—but left during the year and took up a job as a receptionist in the family business of a friend. She enjoyed this work and decided to try a TAFE course the following year but left that after a few months saying that she just 'hated it'. She then moved to another country town and 'partied, partied, partied'. She moved back briefly to her family home before beginning a diploma of arts at a campus some distance away.

About this time she says:

> Got through a year of that and found out that I was pregnant so I had to leave. And then I moved back …got myself a flat and just kind of waited out the pregnancy until my baby girl came along and then for the next year after that I was getting used to having a baby. And then I met my partner.

Since having her daughter, she has worked in milk bars and helped her partner in his job as caretaker of the local Community House but Ellen describes herself now as 'just a house mum', adding that her partner doesn't want her to work:

> So he would like to be the provider and you know if I want to do schooling or whatever—fine. As for a job, he doesn't want me to go out and get any crappy job when he can go out and get money…I can't say I ever think about where I would like to be. So…I don't really think about myself a much as I think about what I'd like my daughter to be doing. […] like I wouldn't say I've had a crappy life but I haven't been able to do what I would like to do and I would like for M [her daughter] to do whatever she wants to do.

'I basically wanted to piss my mum and dad off'.

Louisa, who is Ellen's younger sister, and 18 at the time of the interview, had left school two years before, early in Year 11. She is currently doing two days a week study as part of a bridging program and describes her decision to leave in very different terms than her older sister and Anna. She says:

> I basically wanted to piss my mum and dad off …Because I'm sort of, I don't know how to put it without hurting my sister's and brother's feelings…I'm the sort of smartest kid out of us all. Like I've got the straightest head on me and like everything like that, so they sort of put all their trust in me to go all the way through high school, and I didn't, so they got disappointed. And that really felt good to disappoint them once in a while because I was making them happy all the time and I just wanted to do something for me for once --so I left school and they cracked it with me. But then the bad stuff started to happen. I had to pay rent and I had to buy food and I had to go out and get a job. In other words it was the worst mistake of my life just to piss my mum and dad off.

While she describes her decision to leave school as desire to 'piss off' her parents, (a 'choice'?) Louisa's recollections of her self as a school girl aren't all that positive. She describes herself as someone who was viewed by her teachers as 'Little Miss Attitude', someone who always had to have the last word.

> Yes. Because everything they would say, I would have to come back and say something else. I'd have to get the last line in. I was one of those kids in high school. I don't know, I got along with most of my teachers, it was just the fact they'd set work and they wouldn't explain it. Like they'd set work up on the board and they'd go 'do this' and it's like, hey what have I got to do with it?

She loved sports and a class she calls 'Engineering', where she learned welding. About her self at school she says:

> I was the entertainer plus the [the one with] most attitude of all in high school. I think that's why I got picked on most of the time. Because most of class clowns are boys but you know, me doing it, it was a bit rude. […] I don't know because it was just weird being the tomboy of them all and they [her friends] would just take it out on me…So I wasn't really in the group…

Louisa at 18, two years after she left school, says much the same as Anna:

> In high school they ask you what you want to be when you are older and you sit there and you think well I don't know…Like they expect you to know everything then and there when you choose your subjects, and it's like what if I want to be this and what if I want to be that. Like so many people have so many different choices and they don't know which one to pick so they go for all of them, which is the smart choice to do.

Discussion

Embedded in these 'stories' of self as school girl, daughter, adult woman, are shadows of mainstream discourses that privilege the self as a 'freely choosing individual', understanding such choices not in terms of 'conditions that systematically limit the capacities of so many to shape their own destiny (Rose, 1996 p. 17) but rather as decisions that each was personally responsible for and that in some ways each has come to regret. Louisa shows some awareness of how gender impacted on her sense of self at school ('Because most of class clowns are boys but you know, me doing it, it was a bit rude…); however but that their socio-economic status may have influenced how they were perceived and contributed to how they 'failed to fit'—such insights are largely absent from these young women's stories. Yet in their narratives, they appear to measure themselves against a particular notion/public personae, of 'good female/student and

'good woman'. That such personae operate as both gendered and classed remained largely unexamined.

About the 'good girl'/good student

According to Ellen the good students are those who were 'better at something' whom the teachers 'would help along'…the 'popular kids were the ones that 'did well'. They were known, liked and helped by the teachers. In contrast, the not-so-good student, and she constructs herself as this, was the one who was 'in the middle—neither 'popular' nor 'geeky' but one who 'didn't really get on with [the] teachers' and therefore didn't ask them for help when they needed it.

Such constructions might this be read as indicative of an endorsement of a particular kind of 'femininity' ('popular', someone whom the teachers' liked, self confident enough to speak up and ask questions, good at 'theory' stuff (eg., English) but not a girl who is good at 'Engineering' or 'someone who saw themselves as a 'tomboy' or a 'footy girl' or 'class clown' or who was in love with sports. All three of the young women professed to a passionate love of playing sport; yet none of them were viewed as 'good girl/student' because of this. To what extent did/does such an aptitude challenge current discourses of 'appropriate' femininity/ the 'good (female) student?

Another dimension of 'good girl/student' within these accounts are students who 'know what they want to do' by Year 10 or Year 11 and therefore are able to *make choices* as to subjects, make decisions regarding their future lives. Despite Anna seeing herself as an 'A' student, someone who could whiz through her work, get it out of the way, so she could enjoy a social life, Anna (as well as Louisa) found the requirement to define her choice of career at 16-17 years old enormously daunting.

In their re-constructions of self as school girl, each of these young women is able to point to where they did--or more often didn't--fit into what it took to be viewed as a 'good student'. Each is aware of what is expected/required to present in such a way, but for

Ellen and Tina, and to a more limited extent, Anna, being able to meet such expectations wasn't possible.

Good student—able to make 'choices'

A sense of bewilderment—not with their actual schooling experiences, but with the *purposes* of schooling seems evident in their varied recollections. So much of high school seemed to be pitched to the Year 11 – 12 VCE, where choices must be made, and where forward decisions about life itself pressed in on them. And each, Louisa, Ellen and Anna, found herself lost in these moments of 'choice', unable to decide, unclear about what 'choices' were actually or realistically available.

This stated inability/unwillingness to make 'choices' concerning 'pathways' may be indicative of a particular classed experience, a lack of familiarity with the normativity of 'going to uni' and/or having 'a career'. Each young woman speaks about how their own mothers stayed home with the children until they went off to school—Anna's mother has never worked in paid jobs; Ellen's mother worked as a hospital cleaner, but only when Ellen was old enough to be left to look after her younger siblings. The absence of experiences, of seeing women 'doing' a wide range of work, of understanding the links between subject choice, VCE scores, uni or TAFE courses and 'career plans' made these young women aware of the discourse, 'ie., you must choose a pathway', but with few maps, or guides, or directions to help them do so informatively. Being *told* to 'choose' versus *knowing how* were two different realities and none of these young women at 16 saw themselves as informed enough to do so.

How these young adult women speak of their adult aspirations concerning work is suggestive of the ongoing importance of grounded experiences, and of the need to develop better ways of becoming knowledgeable, in order to make ones that have the informed 'choices'. For example, Anna, while currently working on weekends in an aged-care facility, now has planned out a five-year study program for herself in order to become a midwife—a 'career' she experienced first hand when having her three children. Ellen, who spent six months working as a secretary, which she quite enjoyed, now

recognises that in order for her to get back into this type of work, she needs to do a computer course. Louisa talks about wanting to be a lawyer—on the basis of watching 'Law and Order' and 'Arrest and Trial' on television. These images have inspired her—but when she looked into getting into a law course, (on the internet after she had left school) she learned that she needed a Year 12 score of 98.5. She says:

> It's a hard job to get in to. So you have to be really smart to do it. I know I'm smart enough to do it. I just don't have--I don't know-- I think I've got a short attention span…Like something has to really interest me to do it. And I'm really interested in being a lawyer but the subjects that I have to do to do it are just boring.

The point is that while the young women 'know' that they need to 'assemble' an identity around notions of 'choice', their decisions about 'career' or 'paid work' are based on limited life experiences. They 'choose' on the basis of that which they 'know' ie., have experienced since leaving school (midwifery; secretarial) or vicariously (through popular media representations).

How realistic is it then to expect socio-economically disadvantaged young women at Year 10 or Year 11 to make decisions in terms of where they want to be, who they want to become when they have so few realistic exemplars to work from? Despite the fact that they know this 'discourse', understand that they must re-present themselves as choosing, in reality the forced 'choices' around subjects work to close down rather than open up alternatives. Thus for these young women the emphasis while at school to be/come freely choosing individuals served as a means of social exclusion rather than providing a means for self affirmation or satisfaction.

Good woman

Finally, one more point: in contrast to some current 'personae' of 'good woman' (career-minded, decisive, ambitious, capable), in the stories of their personal relations that these young women tell there are vestiges of a different, 'older' discourse in determining an

identity as 'good woman'. For these three women, close family links, practical support for and from their family members and old friends, (eg., in the area of looking after each others' children, sorting out problems, providing emotional support), being 'best friends' with their mothers, and displaying loyalty to their partners' aspirations all are part of the narrative of the self as 'good woman'.

Anna, in response to the question, 'Who helps you, who supports you?' says:

> My family and my closest friends. I have a very close-knit support group. […] in our little group…you sort of lean on each other and my mum is a big, big support. It's basically a small, small group but we can count on each other for anything. If someone needs something, you just pick up the phone and then they will call the next person until someone can get it organised. Yes, between us all, we usually get stuff organised or help each other in some way.

Family and friend networks are central to their sense of well-being—resources that they use in ways that might be fundamentally different than those available to more materially well-off young women. This is reminiscent of what Reay (1998) identifies as the 'collectivist inclinations of earlier eras among working class groupings' (p. 263) and stands in opposition to that of the individualistic, self realising, autonomous self that Rose (1998) identifies in the 'regimes' of current psychological, psychoanalytical discourses. Yet this loyalty to one another, commitment to the well-being of others, extended community relationships is not what is valued, recognised or rewarded in the public discourse of 'good woman'. While the pride that the three young women take in their close family and community relationships is evident in the way they speak so positively about them, in the public discourse of 'success', such networks seem to be paid too little attention and given too little status. What they see as meaningful and important in their own lives is not recognised adequately when their 'lack' of paid work, 'lack' of Year 12 certificates or 'lack' of ongoing education is what gets measured and works to classify them as 'marginalised' and 'at risk'.

Conclusion

In the contradictions they speak about between mainstream discourses of 'good girl/student/good woman' and the auto/biographies these young women 'assemble' concerning school selves and current lives and hopes, there are spaces for understanding where other readings and changed understandings of 'at risk' might be possible. Firstly, recognising that 'individual choice' is always governed by a combination of how well one 'fits' into current discourses of 'correct' class, gender, 'race' and ethnicity, as constituted, recognised and valued within current schooling practices remains a significant challenge. Such recognition requires that schools better attend to the gender and classed identities through which the needs and desires of young women are produced and attend to alternative ways of being in the world. The privileging of the linear, conventional approaches to education denies developing and recognising a range of options that might give a more generous and richer meaning to the notion of 'choice'.

Secondly, locating 'choice' as a limitless possibility, without reference to personal circumstances, lived experiences and access to material as well as cultural resources, continues to place the 'blame' of becoming 'at risk' or 'marginalised' on the individual without due recognition of the limiting (or enhancing) social, economic or cultural capital that young people work with through their life circumstances. Attending to such differences can work to better address needs and wants rather than constructing deficits. And thirdly, continuing to privilege a particular notion of 'the feminine' (school girl/young woman) on the basis of 'public personae' denies alternative ways of being and becoming in the world. Rather than 'at risk', 'marginalised' or 'early school leaver', what other configurations of meaning are provided through and in these young women's 'stories'? Anna suggests one significant way of reading 'early school leaving' differently when she says 'Maybe you have to live a bit to decide what it is you want to do.'

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[1] This three year project is funded through an Australian Research Council Discovery Grant (2001-2004) and is located in two states, Victoria and South Australia. Dr Julie McLeod of Deakin University, as well as Professor Jane Kenway and Professor Allison McKinnon of University of South Australia are Chief Investigators along with the author of this paper.

[2] Specifically, the research project aims to:

1) Identify the common and diverse needs and interests of different groups of young women in two locations characterised by poverty, one in South Australia and one in Victoria;
2) Examine survival strategies and crucial turning points in the lives of these young women.
3) Compare their life circumstances with those of their mothers (or mother figures) in order to analyse cross-generational continuities, disruptions and contradictions;
4) Explore both the perceptions that teachers and other key youth service providers, such as youth and employment agency workers, have of these young women and their mothers, and the interactive dynamics between these groups;
5) Analyse this range of data in relation to current theories about social and gender justice, and further the conceptual understandings and methodological approaches of research on disadvantaged young women and educational and social injustice and justice.
6) Recommend ways in which education and youth services may best assist young women to deal with the difficulties their circumstances evoke, and promote justice in schooling and youth services.